

Life in the Factory: The Story of the Lowell Mill Girls



Cast:

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Mill Girls:

Mary

Laura

Susan — new to the mill

Becca

Rachel

Hannah — from a different mill

Sarah — from a different mill

Joe (Mr. Johnson) — mill supervisor

Mrs. White — boarding mistress

Setting:

The year is 1845 and the Lowell, Massachusetts, mills are booming with production of textiles. Thanks to the many young women who work and live in the mill's boardinghouses, the textile industry is thriving. Women were sought to do the work because they could be paid at a lower wage than men, and most were more skilled at weaving and spinning from their work at home. The girls were recruited from across New England to work in the mills, often far away from their families. This play takes place in one of Lowell's most successful mills and follows the story of a few girls who were unhappy with the dangerous conditions their work presented.

Scene 1

Narrator 1: Life in the Lowell Mills was very difficult and took a lot of hard work and energy. Girls worked very long hours at machines that were dangerous to their health. Girls could easily get fingers or hair caught in the fast-moving machines if they were not careful. The air in the room was filled with bits of fibers, often making it difficult to breathe.

Narrator 2: For this reason, many girls only worked in the mills for four to five years, however, this was still a very long time to endure horrible working conditions.

Mary: What a long week this has been! I'm so glad we're due for a rest soon. My heart aches to have some free time on Sunday. Working Monday through Saturday really makes me weary.

Laura: I know! And because of our early curfew, I have little time in the evening to write in my diary and my journal. *The Lowell Offering* is looking for some new articles and I'd love to have some of mine published!

Narrator 1: Often the mills wanted to improve the minds of the girls who worked there. They provided a lecture series from the local Harvard University, and local newspapers published many of the girls' writings in a magazine called *The Lowell Offering*.

Becca: Mary, what were your plans for this Sunday? Should we invite Susan, the new girl?

Mary: Of course we shall! On Sunday I will attend church with all the girls as usual; you know we are required to attend St. Anne's. I just wish our lives were not so controlled by the mill owners — even down to the church we attend!

Rachel: You know why we have to go to St. Anne's, don't you? It's because the mill owners

built it!

Becca: Yes, I know. But what about after that? What are you going to do with the rest of your day?

Laura: Well I'd like to spend some time writing, I know that for sure!

Mary: I think I'd like to go into Boston on the Boston and Lowell Railroad. Then again, Hannah and Sarah from the next mill over wanted to go to a production of Shakespeare's *Othello*. I'm so torn.

Rachel: Why don't we all go to the play together and take Susan! I think taking her to Boston after only being here a few days might be overwhelming. I hear she's from a small town in Vermont. It must be scary coming to a big booming town like Lowell!

Narrator 2: As if on cue, Susan enters the common room of the boardinghouse where the other girls have been relaxing after a long day. She looks shy and afraid.

Becca: Susan, how was your day today? Any better than yesterday?

Susan: (shyly) Slightly.

Mary: Well I have something that will make it better! Tomorrow's Saturday, which means we only have to do a short eight-hour shift. Then it's Sunday! On Sundays we all go to church together, then we have some free time to do as we please! We were hoping you would join us for a play.

Susan: I would love to, but I can't spend the money.

Laura: But we get paid soon! And we'll lend you the money until then.

Susan: It's not that. I need to save every penny to send back home to my family. They can't pay their farm mortgage, and my brother desperately wants to attend Harvard. That's why I'm here.

Rachel: Well, of course we're all here to support our families, but we can also take advantage of the opportunities we don't get at home. Don't you want to have the chance to feel free?

Mary: Well only partly free. The mill owners keep a tight leash on us, telling us when to get up and go to bed, where to go to church...

Rachel: But besides that. Here you're free to be your own person. No parents telling you who to become!

Laura: That's right. I came here to help my family, but also because I wanted to be close to all the amazing literature that a city provides. There are so many libraries and novels and inspirations for my writing!

Becca: I came because I need to save some money for a dowry so that I can have a better chance of marrying back home. My papa says I need to make my own way.

Mary: You see, we all came with our families in mind, but that doesn't stop us from enjoying what little free time we have! With the horrible conditions we deal with each day, we need to have something to lighten our hearts.

Susan: Yes, I can understand that. These thirteen-hour days are so tiring. I don't know if I'll ever get used to it. I would do the spinning at home for my family, but here things are so much more rushed as the machines do it so fast. It's like lightning!

Rachel: Not to mention the noise! It's deafening being in those rooms. My room has 1,000 machines all going at once. Every day I wonder if I'll be able to hear the next!

Susan: It's so different from life on the farm in Vermont. So tiring, so loud, and unfriendly.

Mary: But we're friendly! And we're asking you to a play! So you'll come then?

Susan: I suppose so. Thank you.

Scene 2

Narrator 1: The girls have returned from the theater and are saddened at the thought of another long work week. They are joined by two girls from another mill, Hannah and Sarah.

Mary: I can't believe how fast the weekends fly by. I really wish we had shorter work days or else Saturday *and* Sunday off.

Sarah: How long are your work days? Ours are thirteen during the week and eight on Saturdays.

Becca: The same. I wish they were much shorter.

Hannah: You should join us, then. There is a petition going around at our mill protesting the

long days and trying to pressure the government to put a cap on the length of the day at only ten hours!

Narrator 2: The Ten Hour Movement began in 1844 where mill girls signed a petition to pressure mills to change their requirements to a ten-hour work day. There were mixed feelings from the girls in the mills.

Susan: Couldn't they fire us for signing it? I couldn't afford to lose my job. My family depends on me!

Laura: Ooooooh! Wouldn't that be nice! Only ten hours! Imagine all the time I could spend writing! Where can I sign this?

Becca: Wait a second. I'm not signing anything. What is this petition?

Hannah: Well, it's being passed around from mill to mill. It's asking girls to use their right to petition. That's in our Bill of Rights, something the mill owners can't take away from us. It means we can all sign our names to a document saying we don't like something, and if the government sees that enough of us are unhappy, they might change it!

Rachel: But all our government cares about is money. And keeping the mills working longer hours gets them that. They don't care about us.

Sarah: Well we're citizens too, and we have the right to say what we don't like! It's a written law that we can't get in trouble!

Susan: But I'm still worried that the mill owners will fire us. Couldn't they just say that we're not doing our jobs? That way it doesn't look like they're firing us for signing a petition?

Narrator 1: At that moment, in bursts Mrs. White, the boarding mistress, who happened to overhear the girls' conversation.

Mrs. White: What's all this talk about petitions? Shouldn't you girls be getting ready for bed?

Mary: Yes, Mrs. White. But we were just talking about our rights as United States citizens.

Rachel: Mrs. White, could we get in trouble for signing a petition?

Narrator 2: Faced with a tough question, Mrs. White is unsure how to answer.

Mrs. White: Well girls. That's a difficult thing to answer. While you are legally allowed to sign a petition to state your beliefs, that doesn't stop the mill owners from coming up with a different legal way of firing you.

Susan: I thought so! I knew this wasn't a good idea.

Laura: But don't they need us to run the machines? Really, they can't fire us that easily.

Mrs. White: Laura dear, you know very well there are hundreds of girls to take your place. Hundreds who would be willing NOT to sign a petition.

Becca: But Mrs. White, don't you think the hours we work are unfair?

Mrs. White: That I do, but it's not my place to complain. I work here too, remember and I need my job as much as you girls do. I would suggest you girls put it out of your minds. Especially because you have ten minutes until curfew. Hannah, Sarah you had better be going. And don't try to stir up any more trouble.

Sarah: Thank you.

Hannah: But don't forget what we said. It's our right. And I *am* going to sign.

Narrator 1: The rest of the girls were shuffled off to bed by Mrs. White, not allowed to talk any more about it.

Narrator 2: But the next day, the girls were still buzzing about the thought of the petition.

Scene 3

Narrator 1: On the mill floor, the girls were supervised by Mr. Johnson, who the girls referred to as Joe, and Mr. Smith.

Narrator 2: Joe was more of a friend than a supervisor and he understood the girls' situation, but Mr. Smith was cruel and too friendly with the mill owners to care about the girls.

Narrator 1: This day, Joe was the supervisor in their area and Mr. Smith was in another building. The girls knew Joe would support them because he was often friendly to them, so they felt comfortable discussing the petition for the few minutes of break they were afforded while on the factory floor.

Laura: So what do you think about what Mrs. White said last night. About the petition.

Becca: I think it's wise not to sign. I don't want to get in trouble and risk losing my job!

Susan: I feel the same way. Especially because of how much my family depends on me.

Mary: But if we don't take action, then no one will! Who will stick up for us? Who will help us get better working conditions?

Rachel: But Mrs. White had a point. Even though there are 10,000 workers here, they can fire as many as they want because there's that many girls outside who would love our jobs!

Mary: But they can't fire us for signing a petition!

Susan: No, but they can find another reason to fire us, which would work just as well. They could say that we haven't been attending church as per the rule handbook.

Becca: Or they could say that we stole some cloth or do not show proper manners expected of us. Remember, the rules state we must not be immoral! We are here upon aspects of certain character, not just because we have hands to work.

Laura: True, but these conditions they keep us in are horrible. You must admit that tending to four looms at a time takes so much energy and attention you leave with a headache!

Mary: And I've developed quite a cough from the thick air filled with bits of fiber and cloth. Not to mention I'm sick of working in the dark! I know they want to keep costs down, but couldn't we at least open the window shades?

Becca: They do that so it keeps our minds on our work. But despite these conditions, it's better than no job at all, and at least it gives us a chance to eventually have a better life.

Laura: So I guess from that statement you're not signing the petition?

Becca: No. I wouldn't dream of it.

Susan: Neither am I. It's too risky.

Narrator 2: At that moment, Joe rushes in to alert the girls they're over their time limit.

Joe: Girls! Back to work! You'll have me lose my job at this rate!

Mary: Joe, what would you do if you didn't like your working conditions? Would you use your right to petition like in the Bill of Rights?

Joe: *Ha!* And risk getting fired? I think not! Just because the government says I'm allowed to sign a petition, doesn't mean there aren't ways for companies to let you know they don't like it. I couldn't dream up all the alternate excuses the mills could come up with to fire you if they found out you signed a petition. Best to just grump about it and move on. Especially because I hear the mills have found out about the petition and are looking to find out who's involved. If I were you I wouldn't touch it.

Laura: But it's our right!

Joe: Yes, but is the government going to come out here and protect you, Laura, if you chose to sign it? It has bigger and better things to deal with. Besides, if you took them to court, they'd come up with lots of other legitimate reasons to fire you. And that would drag me into it. So please don't get yourselves *and me* into trouble. Back to work!

Susan: At least we have food and shelter and are able to send home money to our families.

Joe: That's right. And think of what a fine life you'll lead having come out here rather than living life on the farm.

Mary: I guess you're right. Hopefully some day changes will be made to help us!

Narrator 1: Despite realizing there was nothing they could do, the girls returned to work, thinking of a day when eventually the workers' interests would be considered.

Narrator 2: While the workers constantly hoped and tried to make changes, the reality of the system kept them from being very successful. Mills were owned by rich men who wanted to become even richer, preventing true change to occur.

Epilogue:

Life was very difficult for many of the mill girls. They had the burden of responsibility to send home money to families or to create their own dowries so they could make something of themselves in their adult lives. Having this pressure made them very unsure about signing a petition for better working conditions. The risk of losing their jobs was very high and many girls did not wish to take that risk. Nevertheless, the Ten Hour Movement had 4,500 names on it in 1845 when it was sent to the government. Unfortunately, the document was not considered by Congress and no changes were made. It wasn't until 1874 when Congress finally passed a law for 10 hour days, but this came much after girls stopped working for the mills. By the late 1840s, immigrants began replacing the girls in the mills.

Despite these horrible working conditions, the mills gave young girls a taste of independence. Many were unwilling to give up this independence and many also learned through their writings for *The Lowell Offering* that the pen had amazing power. These became seeds for later women's movements. Unfortunately it did not help the mill girls because the owners feared the girls would write about the horrible conditions and the magazine was shut down.

Discussion Questions:

1. How long did the girls work each day?
2. What were the girls required to attend on Sundays?
3. What could the girls do in their free time?
4. What were some reasons why the girls worked in the mills?
5. What right did the girls want to invoke?

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Discussion Questions:

1. How long did the girls work each day?
Thirteen hours on weekdays, eight hours on Saturdays.
2. What were the girls required to attend on Sundays?
Church.
3. What could the girls do in their free time?
Go see a play, go to Boston, write.
4. What were some reasons why the girls worked in the mills?
To create a dowry for themselves, send home money to family, gain some independence, be close to Boston.
5. What right did the girls want to invoke?
The right to petition.